

THE TAMIL HOMELAND: ITS POLITICAL AND INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS

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A homeland is an indispensable attribute of ethnic nationalism.¹ It is not a natural or fixed phenomenon but it is created, demarcated, perpetuated and may be contested. The explanation of the genesis of homelands has been an important area of research in the studies of nationalism. Continuing along this tradition, I will examine the origination of the Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka.

The creation, articulation, and perpetuation of a homeland is a result of both intended and unintended consequences of actions by members of an ethnic group. By necessity an ethnic group's conceptual articulation of a homeland and its demarcation are political acts performed with political intentions. I identify three sub-groups who engage themselves in these tasks: political leaders, intellectuals, and the mass population. Although these sub-groups are not mutually exclusive, each engages in a slightly different activity. The cooperation among them is usually achieved through organized political institutions such as political parties. As has been the case in Sri Lanka, a single, well-developed nationalist party may facilitate the establishment of a homeland by taking the lead in its demarcation.

EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF TAMIL HOMELAND

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic state. The two largest ethnic groups are the Sinhalese, which constitutes 78% of the population and by its sheer numbers is the dominant group, and the Tamils, which constitutes 8% of the population. Despite its smaller size this latter group is the most politically active minority. The Tamils have been agitating for a greater share in the economy, greater recognition of their culture, and more political power since Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948. The early

¹A.D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1983); A.W. Orridge and C.H. Williams, "Autonomist Nationalism: A Theoretical Framework for Spatial Variation in Its Genesis and Development," *Political Geography Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1982): 19-40; B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1973).

political organization of the Tamils evolved from an ethnic party in the 1940s and 1950s to a nationalist party in the 1960s and 1970s. Most recently it was transformed into a violent separatist guerrilla movement in the mid-1980s.

The concepts of an autonomous Tamil nation and a Tamil homeland are relatively new. A homeland is the geographic area to which a group of people shares a historical attachment and/or a sense of identity. A nation is borne when the group feeling of "togetherness" (i.e., common acceptance of particular values) is important enough to justify political demarcation of the homeland. These two concepts, homeland and nation, were introduced into the Tamil political discourse by the Federal Party in the 1950s. The Federal Party demanded a Tamil state or province within a federal union of Sri Lanka. The resolution of the first national convention of the Federal Party clearly stated that the "Tamil-speaking people in Ceylon constituted a nation distinct from that of the Sinhalese in every fundamental test of nationhood."² However, no political demarcation for the Tamil nation was included in this resolution.

The general population of the two communities have actively contributed, either wittingly or unwittingly, to the creation of the Tamil homeland concept. Ethnic riots directed against the Tamils living outside of the Jaffna peninsula is the most important factor which led to mass support for a homeland. During periods of unrest, the peninsula and the eastern coast became the destinations of Tamils who were forced from other parts of the island. The Tamils felt that they were safe only in these areas; particularly in the Jaffna peninsula, which already had a large Tamil population. The resulting growth in population contributed to the identification of these areas as the Tamil homeland (Figure 1).

The idea of a Tamil homeland gained renewed interest in the late 1970s with the formation of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), the first popular political party among the Tamils. Anti-Tamil ethnic riots also helped to solidify support for its demarcation. TULF politicians worked actively to

²Amirthalingam A. "The Path to Our Destiny," Silver Jubilee Souvenir of the Federal Party (Jaffna, 1974), p. 17.

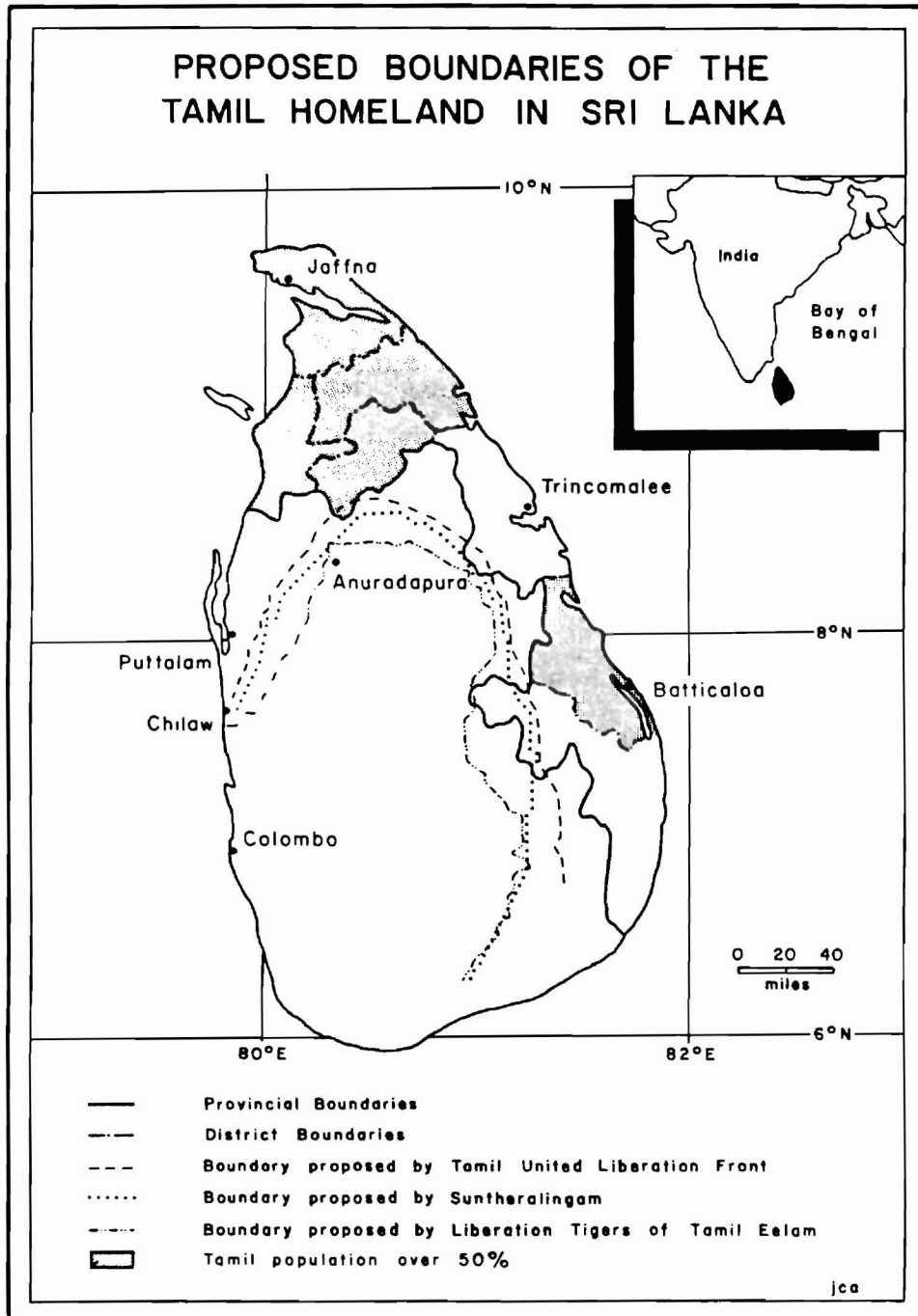


Figure 1

bring the homeland into existence. For example, because most Tamil-speaking people are Hindus, TULF leaders forced the removal of most of the temple ruins and other remnants of the early Buddhist civilization from the Northern and Eastern provinces.³ More recently a more violent approach has been employed by the separatist guerrillas who have carried out mass killings to force the Sinhalese out of these provinces.⁴

Since the early 1980s numerous articles and several books have been written directly or indirectly about the Tamil homeland.⁵ One of the major arguments for a homeland has been that the Tamil people have a history as long as that of the Sinhalese and that they have been historically the principal inhabitants of the Northern and Eastern provinces.⁶

CRITERIA FOR DEMARCATION OF TAMIL HOMELAND

The political demarcation of a Tamil homeland has been largely an exercise of space-time arbitration (Figure 1). Various criteria have been used to define it. In the late 1940s, when the Federal Party dominated Tamil politics, language was considered a major criterion because Tamil speakers dominated the Northern province and made up a large proportion of the population in the Eastern province. Many Muslims speak Tamil, which added to the decision to emphasize the language criterion (Table 1).

The assumption that a common language negates ethnic differences was soon to be proven wrong. The Muslims vehemently opposed Federal Party policies. Thus by 1976, when the TULF came to dominate Tamil politics, the criterion had changed from language to ethnicity. Until the present the TULF has deliberately downplayed religion as part of the defining criteria of ethnicity.⁷

³Government of Sri Lanka, "Hansards: Parliamentary Debates Official Report" [manuscript], 15 (11 November 1983): 71-160.

⁴Shantha K. and J.S. Duncan, "A Disputed Homeland," *Focus* 37 (Spring 1987): 25.

⁵Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, *Towards Liberation* ([Colombo]: LTTE Publication, 1984); Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, *Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam* ([Colombo]: LTTE Publication, 1983); Ponnambalam Satchi, *Sri Lanka: National Conflict and the Tamil Liberation Struggle* (London: The Tamil Information Center, 1983); S.J. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁶Ponnambalam, op. cit., footnote 5.

⁷K. Siathamby, "Some Aspects of the Social Composition of the Tamils of Sri Lanka," *Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1984), pp. 121-45.

Table 1: Ethnic Population of the Eastern and Northern Provinces

Year	Sinhala	Tamil	Muslim	Sinhala	Tamil	Muslim
1901	8,788	96,926	62,454	1,555	326,397	52,738
1946	27,556	131,494	109,066	9,602	441,250	16,691
1981	293,358	399,406	315,201	29,201	900,893	52,738

According to TULF intellectuals, historical continuity of the Tamil presence in the northern and eastern provinces is one of the strongest criteria upon which the Tamil homeland should be based.

Suntheralingam argued that "for over 2400 years, there was always one part of Lanka which was in the Dominion of Tamils. . . ."⁸ He elaborates by saying "the Tamils had their own kings for over two thousand years, with only two breaks. . . ."⁹ The TULF manifesto reads that "from the dawn of the history the Sinhalese and Tamil nations have divided between them the possession of Ceylon."¹⁰

In addition, Ponnambalam, a lawyer living in London and writing on the historical legitimacy of the Tamil homeland, extended Tamil history still further back. He writes that "The Sri Lankan Tamils of today are the lineal descendants of the original inhabitants of the island. . . . At the time of the introduction of Buddhism (3rd Century BC), Tamil kingly rule was centered in Anuradapura, the ancient capital which the Tamils kings founded."¹¹ Ponnambalam's quote was not referenced, but he alleges it to be from ancient Sri Lankan historical texts; yet it is possible that it is a deliberate creation of a new history to legitimize the Tamil homeland.¹² A Tamil anthropologist Stanley Tambiah declares that

⁸C. Suntheralingam, *Eylom: Beginning of Freedom Struggle* (Colombo: Suntheralingam, C., 1967), p. 22.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰"Tamil United Liberation Front," Resolution passed at the convention held at Pannakam, Vaddukodai (14 May 1976), p. 1.

¹¹Ponnambalam, op. cit., footnote 5, p. 28.

¹²When the Sinhalese prince Dutugemunu was going to declare war against the Tamils his father had allegedly replied, "Let Tamils rule that side of the Maha Ganga (now Mahaweli Ganga) and the districts this side of the Maha Ganga are more than enough for us to rule" (Ponnambalam, op. cit., footnote 5, p. 29).

"Jaffna and Vavunia, Batticaloa and Trincomalee. . ." comprise the Tamil homeland.¹³ It should be noted that the majority of Sri Lankan historians disagree with the Tamil interpretations of the Tamil history in Sri Lanka.¹⁴

Historical continuity of the Tamils in Sri Lanka is not adequate for a precise demarcation of their homeland, since there have been changes in the areal distribution of Tamil dominance (Figure 1). According to Tamil nationalists, it is to avoid this ambiguity that a precise time period is required as a basis for demarcating the homeland. The Tamils have selected the period from the late 1920s through the early 1930s. The probable basis for this selection is clear. It is commonly accepted that the Jaffna peninsula of the Northern province has been populated exclusively by Tamils from about twelfth and thirteenth centuries. However, ethnic population patterns in the Eastern province have been very dynamic, and no single ethnic group has been dominant in the rest of the province. Population data from census reports and various descriptive accounts by civil servants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveal that population patterns in this province were ethnically heterogeneous, but heavily biased in favor of the Tamil group.¹⁵ The proportion of Tamils to Sinhalese in the region's population increased until the 1930s when government-sponsored irrigation schemes began attracting large numbers of Sinhalese settlers (Table 2).

Thus the 1920s is the last decade of Tamil ethnic dominance in the Eastern province. Tamil nationalists argue that all future population changes in this region should conform to the settlement pattern from this decade. However, Tamil separatists argue that the proportion of Sinhalese in the region should be kept at pre-1920s levels, and they characterize the subsequent Sinhalese immigration as

¹³Tambiah, op. cit., footnote 5, p. 7.

¹⁴DeSilva, K. M., *The Traditional Homelands of The Tamils of Sri Lanka: A Historical Appraisal Occasional Papers-1* (Sri Lanka: International Center for Ethnic Studies, 1987), p. 46.

¹⁵Shantha K. Hennayake, "Spatial Dimensions of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka" (Master's thesis, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, 1987), pp. 180-92.

an "invasion of the Tamil homeland," which has made "the Tamils a minority within their own homeland."¹⁶

Table 2: Increase in Eastern Province Ethnic Population

Year	Sinhala	Tamil	Muslim
1881	5,947	75,488	43,001
1901	8,778	96,926	62,454
1921	8,744	101,880	76,010
1946	9,896	131,494	109,026
1971	149,458	302,404	248,396

BOUNDARY OF THE HOMELAND

Tamil nationalists do not agree where their homeland is but several locations have been suggested.

Suntheralingam claimed that:

the area which constituted the traditional homelands of the Tamils is unmistakably shown to extend from Chilaw, northward and eastward . . . to comprise the present Trincomalee District, Batticaloa District, right down to the mouth of Walawe Ganga.¹⁷

The first TULF election manifesto defined the boundaries of the Tamil homeland as follows:

the territory stretching in the western sea-board from Chilaw through Puttalam to Mannar and thence to the Northern Region, and in the east, Trincomalee and also the Batticaloa Regions that extend southward up to Kumana or the northern banks of the river Kumbukkan Oya were firmly established as the exclusive homeland of the Tamils.¹⁸

¹⁶Ponnambalm, op. cit., footnote 5; A. Amirthalingam, *Sir Lanka's Leader of Opposition A. Amirthalingam, M.P., Analyzes the New Constitution* (Nallur, Sri Lanka, 1978).

¹⁷Suntheralingam, op. cit., footnote 8, p. 20.

¹⁸Tamil United Liberation Front, *Election Manifesto* (Colombo, 1977), p. 2.

According to these versions more than one-third of the island and its coast would come within the homeland, which would engulf large Sinhalese areas in the southern and Eastern parts of the island.

Another Tamil publication extended the homeland to include the entire Eastern and Northern provinces as well as the district of Puttalam and parts of Kurunegala and Colombo districts.¹⁹

Ponnambalam and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a separatist guerrilla organization, also have endorsed this boundary.²⁰

The Tamil nationalists have deliberately omitted the present population distribution pattern as a criterion for boundary demarcation. There are two reasons for this omission. Firstly, the Tamil population is concentrated in only a few areas of the Northern and Eastern provinces. Secondly, more than 40% of the Tamil population lives outside the Northern and Eastern provinces.

Although many individuals have proposed boundaries that go beyond the Northern and Eastern provinces, the actual area that has been demanded is confined to the two provinces. Smaller provincial administrative units--the district, Assistant Government Agent Division, and Grama Sevaka Division--were deliberately left out of the demarcation debate by Tamil leaders, because the Tamil population, especially in the Eastern province, is in fact concentrated into several distinct areas, whereas many other areas are predominantly populated by other ethnic groups. Beginning in 1971 the Tamils constituted a majority only in one district (Batticaloa) of the three districts in the Eastern province. In the district of Ampara, Muslims constituted slightly more than 30% of the population, whereas in Trincomalee the Sinhalese constituted close to 50%.²¹ Obviously the decision to use provincial data in the demarcation of the Tamil homeland was a deliberate decision by the Tamil nationalists.

Both Tamils and Sinhalese have come to accept the Northern and Eastern provinces as Tamil areas. However, the official interpretation of the Sri Lankan government had always fallen short of recognizing these areas as the Tamil homeland. As early as 1958, when the government drafted

¹⁹*Tamil Information Center, Insecurity of Tamils in Sri Lanka* (Surrey, England: Thornton Heath, 1983).

²⁰Ponnambalam, *op. cit.*, footnote 5, p. 268.; Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, *op. cit.*, footnote 5, p. 26.

²¹Hennayake, *op. cit.*, footnote 15, pp. 172-231.

legislation that made Tamil the official language in these provinces, the government accepted them as Tamil areas.²² Agreements were made between the Sri Lanka government and Tamil nationalists in 1957 and 1965; they aimed at devolving political power to the Tamils in the Northern and Eastern provinces.²³ However, they were never implemented. Most recently, the Sri Lanka government broke a long-standing position and recognized the Tamil homeland by signing the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord.²⁴

CONCLUSION

An ethnic group aspiring to achieve political autonomy often deems it necessary to project itself as a nation. An overriding preference of such a group is to have a homeland which would form the political territory of the group. However, when a homeland is demarcated by one ethnic group other groups may perceive this as a threat to their territories. Thus homeland demarcation is a politically controversial exercise.

The Tamils have concluded that their homeland is constituted by the Northern and Eastern provinces. Until recently both the Sri Lankan government and the Sinhalese refused to recognize a "Tamil Homeland." This recognition is the outcome of a long and exhaustive political battle between Tamil political parties and the Sri Lanka government. There are still certain extreme elements within the Sinhalese community that are dissatisfied with the government decision; they argue that it will eventually allow the Tamils to establish a separate state. Conversely, there are Tamil separatists who oppose the government decision because it came with a political package promising only provincial autonomy and not complete political independence. As a result the Tamil homeland issue is far from being settled.

²²Section 4 of the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act (no. 28: 1958) states that "Correspondence. . . between any local authority in the Northern or Eastern Province and any official in his official capacity may, as prescribed, be in the Tamil Language."

²³These agreements were signed by incumbent prime ministers and leaders of the Tamil political party. However, owing to the political pressure of the Sinhalese-Buddhists, they were unilaterally abrogated by the prime ministers.

²⁴Section 1.4 of the agreement reads: "Also recognizing that the Northern and the Eastern provinces have been the historical habitation of Sri Lankan Tamil speaking peoples. . . ."